

The Tagore-Ocampo Encounter: Tangled, Complex Realities. A Personal Research Survey

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Researching the Tagore-Ocampo encounter for over half a decade was a very special event in my life in more than one way. I would like to begin by following Victoria Ocampo's example and approaching the subject from the centre of my own life, which will hopefully give some insight into the process of cross-cultural conversation.

Tagore was part of my natural heritage. I belong to a generation of Bengalis who received Tagore as an acknowledged classic of their tradition. Myself and my sister immediately after me were named by our parents after two of Tagore's favourite flowers, strengthening our sense of bonding with him. It is said that absorbing Tagore's songs makes one a Bengali, and I first heard his songs in my own mother's voice. I read him from early childhood onwards, almost as soon as I could read, and wrote poetry under the inspiration of his words. His works came to us almost like personal gifts left to us by him, or as the English poet Keats might have put it, as naturally as leaves come to a tree. He was part of our group identity.

For me it was Victoria Ocampo who was the 'exotic' character. I knew she had been a distant muse to our great poet in the last seventeen years of his life, the woman he called Vijaya and to whom he had dedicated the collection *Purabi* in 1925. But it was working on her friendship with Tagore that unfolded to my eyes the story of a remarkable Latin American woman of the 20th century who could still be a role model to some of us.

I had always been attracted to Spanish music, both vocal and instrumental. To follow the words of Spanish songs, I used to look at the translations provided on the record sleeves, and found that with the help of the little French I had I could follow those translations reasonably well. In my early forties, it was to read Victoria Ocampo in the original that I made a serious effort to teach myself to read Spanish. Though my Spanish was and remains self-taught, it empowered me, for four languages – English, Bengali, French, and Spanish – were needed to unravel the Tagore-Ocampo story.

The story affected me deeply and led me to write two books. The first book, in Bengali, entitled *Rabindranath o Victoria Ocampor Sandhaney* (“In Search of Rabindranath and Victoria Ocampo”) and first published in 1985,¹ marks a stage in my own development as a creative writer. It was there that I first experimented with mixing genres, inserting the first fruits of my Tagore-Ocampo researches within the framework of a novel giving them to my fictional heroine, Anamika. Like me, my heroine is a Bengali woman living in Britain, and like me, she loves Spanish songs. She translates Ladino songs from the Judaeo-Spanish tradition into Bengali for her own pleasure. Eventually her work comes to include translations from Ocampo’s essays and archival findings gathered from the Elmhirst Records Office at Dartington Hall. The archival documents enable her to establish the crucial role played by Tagore’s honorary secretary and travelling companion, the Englishman Leonard Elmhirst, in the development of the friendship between Tagore and Ocampo.

Anamika also examines Tagore’s ideas, in his essays, on the role of women in society and in the inner lives of creative men. She shows how some of Tagore’s ideas on women in his discursive essays can sometimes strike a slightly different note from his portrayal of women in his fiction. In his novels and stories Tagore’s portrayal of women and their struggles is overwhelmingly sympathetic. In some of his essays and journals, however, he can be more introspective and conservative, more preoccupied with the role of women as providers of that *shakti* or female energy which can inspire a male creative artist. Anamika becomes the first person to subject those ideas to a modern feminist analysis, and vis-à-vis those ideas discovers Ocampo’s feminist side. By combining the scholarly and the creative modalities within the same book, I could show life from many different angles in a completely unconventional way. Being a work of fiction in which a Bengali woman gradually brings the Tagore-Ocampo material in front of the reader, the book brought the figure of Victoria Ocampo home to thousands of ordinary Bengali readers who would have never read an academic book on her in English. The heroine of my novel goes through a crisis in her personal life, and doing research on Victoria Ocampo enables her to come through it. None of the historical characters are fictionalized:

1 The first edition was published in 1985 (Dyson 1985), the current edition was published in 1997 by Dey’s Publishing in Calcutta. Both editions were reprinted several times.

fiction remains fiction, and history remains history, but they are juxtaposed and intertwined so that each illuminates the other, creating a new genre of writing. Thus what might be called a 'South/South dialogue' in today's idiom occurred right within my own writing life. Perhaps we work best when such an internalization takes place. Recently a Bengali wrote to me, claiming that reading this book of mine changed his life and he went on to learn Spanish.

My second book on this subject is the academic book in English which brought me the invitation to the conference *SUR / SOUTH. Nuevos paisajes a la India: América Latina / India. Literature and Culture* held in Berlin in 2011: *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden: Rabindranath Tagore and Victoria Ocampo*, published in 1988 and now in its third printing. In this book I had to gather in the Tagore-Ocampo correspondence as an official editor. I provided detailed notes and a very substantial amount of relevant information in twenty introductory chapters. This project, initiated by Visvabharati, the university founded by Tagore at Santiniketan, gave me the opportunity to have some direct experience of Ocampo's continent, to interview people in Argentina who had known her, and to widen my archival researches in Santiniketan and Argentina, assembling a large amount of documentary material. Interestingly, the man who recently contacted me, saying that my Bengali book on Tagore and Ocampo had inspired him to learn Spanish, had not heard of my English book at all until I told him about it myself last year. If we think of our books as conversations with potential readers, as I like to do, this tells us something about the directions in which our books may or may not travel, if we write in two languages.

Ocampo's continent was new to me from the viewpoint of direct experience, but not totally new intellectually. In the late sixties I reviewed a collection of stories and other writings by Borges in a column I used to write, reviewing foreign books, in the widely read Bengali magazine *Desh*. In those days I didn't read Spanish; the book I reviewed was an English translation published in New York, but the experience left its mark on me. Going further back, when I went to school in Calcutta in the late forties and early fifties, years immediately after Indian independence, geography was an extremely important school subject, taught with dead seriousness, as befitted an era that had inherited the global outlook of a world-wide empire. Our knowledge of the world had to match that legacy. Our geography teacher, a dedicated Malayali Christian, had no doubt about this. The very first continent she made us study was South America, perhaps be-

cause she thought that this would be the furthest from our mental world. I was just ten when I was introduced to South America, after which we moved on to Africa. The idea was that although every animal has to know its own immediate environment in order to survive, to be human was also to explore distant spaces and learn how to be at home in them. I have expressed the idea thus in one of my English poems entitled “Maps From My Perspective”:

Every vole knows her habitat, but to be a cosmonaut
 we must know distant spaces – that’s what we,
 grandchildren of an empire, were taught
 at St John’s Diocesan Girls’ High school
 at the corner of Lansdowne Road and Elgin Road.
 Thus South America was the first distant continent
 I clambered on to at the age of ten. Next, Africa.
 O the sheer juice
 of mouthing those names: Congo Basin, Guinea Coast, Tierra del Fuego!
 (Dyson 1999: 63)

I have just quoted from my English collection *Memories of Argentina and Other Poems*, where my experience of Argentina has entered my own creative work. When in 1985 I stood on the balcony of the Villa Miralrío in San Isidro and gazed at the estuary of the Río de la Plata, there was a shock of recognition in realizing that a bit of school geography had come alive for me. After my return from Argentina I also translated and published in a Bengali magazine a bunch of Argentine poems, including some of Rafael Felipe Oteríño, whom I had met at Mar del Plata in 1985. And one of my English poems was translated and published in an Argentine magazine through the enthusiastic efforts of some Argentine contacts.

Victoria Ocampo has recorded that her first, ‘spiritual’ encounter with Tagore was in 1914, when she discovered André Gide’s French re-translation of the English *Gitanjali*. She was going through a great crisis in her personal life. Deeply disillusioned with her marriage, she had just commenced her clandestine love affair with Julián Martínez. The *Gitanjali* brought her deep spiritual consolation. She became an avid and perceptive reader of Tagore’s books in the European versions then available. In 1924 she met Tagore face to face when he, ill with influenza and accompanied by his honorary secretary, Leonard Elmhirst, disembarked in Buenos Ai-

res, hoping to proceed to Peru, a project that was eventually abandoned. Ocampo put them up in the beautiful Villa Miralrío in San Isidro, overlooking the Plata River, while she stayed with her parents in the near-by Villa Ocampo. They also spent a few days together in Chapadmalal, near Mar del Plata. Those were two dramatic months, marked by much interpersonal tension, but also punctuated by moments of enchantment and understanding. Elmhirst played a crucial role in the story of the friendship. Tagore and Ocampo met again in France in 1930, when she organized his first proper art exhibition. There is a link between Ocampo and Tagore's emergence as a visual artist. Ocampo never made it to India, but they did remain friends and influenced each other at a deep level. Inevitably, there were also some communication gaps between them: interpersonal, interlingual, intercultural, and those issuing from the political realities of the times. I understand that the focus of the Berlin *SUR / SOUTH*-Conference is a particular interest in understanding those gaps. I have actually dealt with both the gaps and the positive consequences of their meeting very thoroughly in my book *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden*.

Every encounter happens within a physical and mental space, which contributes to its shape. Leonard Elmhirst's crucial role in the history of the Tagore-Ocampo friendship gives us a clue to the nature of the space in this context. Tagore's entire life was lived under the aegis of the British Empire, which was also the backdrop to his meeting with Victoria Ocampo. It was the Nobel Prize that had made him an international celebrity and accelerated his globe-trotting. He received numerous invitations from foreign countries and met many of his famous contemporaries. English was the *lingua franca* that enabled him to share his thoughts with his international friends, and during the South American trip Elmhirst's role as a secretary to deal with the outside world and as an intermediary between himself and his Argentine fan and hostess was indispensable. It was Elmhirst who persuaded Tagore to accept Ocampo's offer of a villa in which to rest and await recovery from flu. English was the one language all three had in common. Without it, the Tagore-Ocampo friendship could not have developed. The British had substantial economic interests in Argentina, as John King, who explores the British-Argentine connection, comments in his study:

The British bought the rich agricultural goods of the pampa, built the railways, owned public utilities, and invested large amounts of capital. They sold

intermediate and finished goods to Argentina and were supported by a substantial English community which could shop in Harrods, take tea in the 'Richmond' tea-rooms, or play polo at Hurlingham. The British Ambassador, Sir Malcolm Robertson, could remark in 1929, at a time when Borges was a young writer: "Without saying so in so many words, which would be tactless, what I really mean is that Argentina must be regarded as an essential part of the British Empire. (King 1983: 229)

There was thus a parallel between the situation of Tagore's own social class in Bengal, which acquired wealth in the service of the British, and that of Victoria's father, who built a fortune for himself as a civil engineer by building roads and bridges in the interior of Argentina, especially bridges for the British-financed railways. It was Victoria's command of English that enabled her to communicate with Tagore in some depth, once she had overcome her shyness. As we know, French and English were her real literary languages in this period. Her letters to both Tagore and Elmhirst are in a fluent enough English style. A triangular friendship could thus develop among them, which lasted all their lives. Elmhirst and Ocampo continued to be friends after Tagore's death, and Ocampo visited the Elmhirsts at Dartington Hall several times.

And yet there were gaps in communication, in spite of English of a reasonably high standard being available to all three of them. Only for Elmhirst was English the first language. Ocampo wished that Tagore could follow French better or understand some Spanish; Tagore wished that his Vijaya could understand Bengali; Elmhirst wished that his French was better. In the beginning Ocampo had a burning desire to tell Tagore about her devotion to his books, but became tongue-tied in his presence. He was her father's age, a venerable, bearded, exotic figure, and there was some difficulty in their interpersonal communication. She needed Elmhirst's mediation to get closer to him, but she did not want to accept Elmhirst's advice on the kind of personal steps that would be her best route towards him.

The best way for her to gain access to Tagore would have been to learn Bengali, take an interest in his school, and spend some time in Santiniketan. But she was tied to Buenos Aires because of Julián Martínez, and she did not divulge this to either Elmhirst or Tagore. Tagore was disappointed that she never came to see him in his own territory. Her lack of Bengali landed her in some serious errors in her little book on Tagore, *Tagore en las barrancas de San Isidro*, and in the fourth volume of her autobiography (Ocampo 1982: 7-82; see Dyson 1988: 336-340).

In the twenties and thirties Ocampo had only a sketchy idea of the political realities of a man in Tagore's position: a global celebrity but the member of a subject nation, who had spoken out against the cult of nationalism in 1916, had returned his knighthood after the 1919 Amritsar massacre, had disagreed with Gandhi on the non-cooperation movement, and was trying to build a university which could be a meeting-place for the East and the West. He needed to raise funds for his project. Elmhirst, who had worked for Tagore in Sriniketan, understood this side of Tagore's life much better. But at that time Ocampo would not concede that his knowledge of Tagore could be more reliable. It was only after she suffered imprisonment under Perón in 1953 that she understood what it meant not to have political freedom. But she understood Tagore's inner needs as a creative artist better than some other Western friends of Tagore, such as C. F. Andrews and Romain Rolland.

One small but significant example of cultural misunderstanding on Ocampo's part was her failure to understand how hurt Tagore would feel at being excluded from her celebration of Christmas on 25 December 1924. It seems that she left Tagore and Elmhirst on their own that day. This kind of exclusion goes right against the Indian idea of a religious festival and against the grain of Bengali notions of hospitality, which insist that if you are having a celebration of any kind, those who are already your guests must be brought in. Tagore and Elmhirst should have been invited to whatever Christmas party Ocampo's family were having, even if it was for only half an hour.

A major area of communicational ambivalence can be found in the emotionally charged language of love used by Ocampo in her letters. Tagore, who carried a burden of loneliness within him, believed that he had received from her what he called "a woman's love". Ocampo did not try to disabuse him of the idea; she must have instinctively realized that if she went along with it, she would remain his Muse. Later in her life, writing her autobiography, she changed the emphasis, but the letters she wrote to him remain as documentary witnesses to the turmoil she experienced when she met and interacted with him.

Another problem was that while Tagore had come to Latin America hoping to explore its indigenous roots, Ocampo tried to give him a taste of Buenos Aires high culture, which was derived from Europe. This caused some serious misunderstanding. Tagore was more interested in learning

about the local folk music than in hearing the music of eminent European composers like Debussy and Ravel.

Tagore's idea of Argentina had been shaped by the books of the Argentine-born naturalist and travel writer W. H. Hudson, who later settled in England. *That* Argentina was no longer in evidence in the precincts of Buenos Aires. Instead, Tagore had to spend some time in a villa at Chapadmalal, elegantly furnished in the British style, where Ocampo tried to read Baudelaire with him. Tagore called Baudelaire a "furniture poet". There was in this an expression of his impatience with a materialistic life-style, but, as I have realized through a subsequent research project on Tagore, there was also a personal physical factor involved. Tagore had protanopic colour vision, in which reds were lost to view. Interiors with red curtains and polished dark-brown furniture (as in the villa at Chapadmalal) would be too dark for him. He needed lots of sunlight and wide, open spaces to see comfortably (Dyson/Adhikary 1997). The view of the estuary from the balcony of Miralrío was indeed the best gift for him.

At this stage in his life Tagore was trying to find his wings as a visual artist. The *Purabi* Manuscript is full of the Manuscript doodlings from which his art emerged. He never took formal art lessons, probably feeling that because of his partial colour vision deficiency he could not excel at naturalistic painting. He tried to learn from what art history calls Primitivism – tribal artefacts, masks, zoomorphic designs – and looked at illustrated art books in which such items were reproduced. His desire to explore the native roots of Latin American arts and crafts was one reason why he wanted to visit Peru and Mexico. He was interested in the art of the Incas and while in Argentina, had a chance to examine a rich collection of Quechua idols and textiles. A book which he must have read, called *The Art of Old Peru*, published in 1924 and put together under the editorship of the Director of the Ethnological Institute of the Berlin Ethnological Museum (Lehmann/Doering 1924), still survives in the archival library of Visvabharati's art department.

From all his personal searches Tagore eventually succeeded in shaping an Expressionist style of his own. Along with the influence of German Expressionism, including the Expressionist woodcut, there is also the influence of several styles of Primitivist arts and crafts on Tagore's artwork, including Native American styles such as Haida, Tlingit, and Peruvian. In our book on the consequences of Tagore's restricted colour vision on his writings and art, *Ronger Rabindranath* (Dyson/Adhikary 1997), my

research colleagues and I have demonstrated these influences in over 800 pages of discussion, with 126 illustrations. In addition, there are links between Victoria Ocampo and the chair-motif and the oval female face in Tagore's art, which have been explored in *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden* (Dyson 1988: 322-328).

So what can we learn from all this for the furthering of South/South dialogue in our times? I am convinced that good things happen if a personal element is ignited. Both Tagore and Ocampo would have agreed with that. Both tried to accomplish things internationally through their network of friendships. But South/South dialogue cannot function properly if we keep the rest of the world out of it. Both Tagore and Ocampo were universal humanists. I worked on the Tagore-Ocampo relationship as a member of the Bengali diaspora, a British citizen based in England, and this article is based on dialogue during the *SUR / SOUTH*-Conference in Berlin 2011. Governments, embassies, universities: all can play a role if they are prepared to act in an enlightened and courteous manner; but I am sometimes sceptical about whether they can be trusted to do so. I have seen a book entitled *Victoria Ocampo: An Exercise in Indo-Argentine Relationship*, which is, as its subtitle suggests, an exercise in diplomacy. I discuss the problems in this book in my article "Ekta Kutanaik Byayam: Bishoy – Victoria Ocampo" (Dyson [1993] 2005). In a recently published Bengali book, *Plata Nadir Dhare* (Bandyopadhyay 2010), the Tagore-Ocampo story has been extended with imagined elements and exploited to produce pulp fiction bordering on pornography, with a grossly distorted image of Victoria Ocampo. I found it deeply distressing to turn its pages. But there are genuine admirers of Latin American literature among Bengalis too, for instance, Palash Baran Pal in West Bengal, who has translated some of Neruda's poems into Bengali directly from the Spanish, and Razu Alauddin in Bangladesh, who is devoted to the works of Borges.

I am eager to meet the Latin Americans who have learnt Bengali to read Tagore's texts in the original, just as I learnt Spanish to unlock the world of Victoria Ocampo. Are there such scholars? Tagore needs to be translated by competent literary translators into Spanish and Portuguese directly from the Bengali. Obviously, we need a common language to begin any conversation, but in the end, we need in-depth knowledge of each other's languages, where the subtle nuances of cultures are embedded. It seems that no infrastructure for the teaching and learning of Bengali has as yet emerged in Latin America. Also, an intercultural worker, however

gifted, needs support and funding, and interaction with like-minded colleagues. On whom can we rely for that? Universities so often become arenas for power struggles rather than for the disinterested pursuit of knowledge that I despair. In this respect is there something we can perhaps learn from the *SUR/SOUTH*-Conference organized in Berlin? The Institute for Latin American Studies of the Freie Universität Berlin was the first department of Latin American Studies anywhere in the world to invite me to come and talk about my work on Tagore and Ocampo, 23 years after the publication of the English book. In the 1990s when I did a major collaborative project on the consequences of Tagore's colour vision on his literature and art, the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) was the only Western organization that supported my project.

But I am worried about the increasing linguistic politics within India. The hegemony of English in elite circles and the marginalization of Indian-language discourses in pan-Indian and international settings affect us deeply in Tagore Studies. The paradox is that while Tagore has become a sacred national icon, his language has ceased to have an international profile. There should be enough scholarships to study Bengali, Hindi or other Indian languages for international scholars interested in studying Indian subjects. India is a multilingual subcontinent. If we want to use terms such as 'nation' and 'national', then all her languages belong to the nation and need to be given a national status. Foreign scholars wishing to study any of India's languages deserve the same level of help. If India's diversity is suppressed, it gives rise to a form of internal colonialism. Taking all such factors into consideration, in the current ambience I have tended to place more faith in the efforts of individuals to kick-start truly meaningful cross-cultural dialogues, but even here there are false starts. For example, Argentine film director Pablo César was hoping to make a film about Tagore and Ocampo with some financial help from India with me in an advisory capacity. In February 2012 the project was stuck allegedly within the wheels of bureaucracy and has not progressed. Another Latin American was planning to do a play on the same subject and that also has made no progress. After several false starts it seems that my book *In Your Blossoming Flower-Garden* will be translated into Spanish by an Argentine translator and published from Editorial Sur; funding is being negotiated with the Sahitya Akademi through their project "Indian Literature in Translation". How can we marry individual initiative and enlightened patronage from institutions for better cross-cultural bridge-building?

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